

## FIRE WATCH

Jeff Hutcheson



I thought that I would write this week's column about some of the history and myth associated with the American fire service. Credit should go to The Chaplain Corps for some of the following information.

### A HISTORY OF FIREFIGHTERS IN AMERICA

The noble service of firefighting began in the early days of colonial America in Jamestown, Virginia. In January 1608, a fire spread through Jamestown, destroying many of the colonists' homes and provisions. Captain James Smith, who governed the colony at the time, reflected, "I begin to think that it is safer for me to dwell in the wild Indian country than in this stockade, where fools accidentally discharge their muskets and others burn down their homes at night."

As the colonists populated the New World, they often faced the threat of fires. In 1648, the colony of New Amsterdam (later New York) established practices that would become the first steps to organized firefighting in America. First, Governor Peter Stuyvesant appointed fire wardens over the city. These men were given authority to inspect all chimneys and impose fines on anyone who violated the rules of public safety. Later, the colony organized a volunteer force of men who patrolled the streets at night carrying large wooden rattles. If the men spotted a fire, they spun the rattles and then directed the formation of bucket brigades to put out the fire.

The city of Boston was also significant in the development of firefighting in America. When it suffered a series of arson fires and a large conflagration in 1676, the city decided that it needed more effective technology to fight fires. At that time, England was producing a "state of the art fire engine" or London pumper. They sent for this modern piece of machinery, and soon afterwards, America organized its first fire engine company. The company consisted of twelve men and a captain, and they were given wages for their service. The captain's name was Thomas Atkins, and he is remembered as the first firefighting officer in the country.

Although remembered for his other achievements, the famous statesman and inventor Benjamin Franklin was also a fireman. He founded the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia in 1736. The company started with thirty volunteer firefighters, and soon became the standard for volunteer fire companies. Franklin often wrote about the need for organized firefighting in his newspaper, The Pennsylvania Gazette. In 1740, Franklin organized the "Philadelphia Contributorship," which was an early form of fire insurance. Other famous Americans who served as firefighters included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, John Barry, Aaron Burr, Benedict Arnold, James Buchanan and Millard Fillmore. Women also served in this noble tradition. Some of the most prominent women firefighters include Molly Williams, a black slave who belonged to a New York merchant as well as Marina Betts and Lillie Hitchcock.

## MALTESE

## CROSS

As many people know, the Maltese Cross has long been associated with the fire service and how this emblem became the fire service's "Symbol of Honor, Courage, and Dedication." The eight-point Maltese Cross is the international symbol of the fire service's willingness to make great sacrifices in order to protect others from the ravages of fire. It is a badge of courage and honor and its story is over one hundred years old. This honored symbol originated with a group of eleventh century knights who were serving in a Jerusalem hospital. They became known as the Order of Knights Hospitaller and later became the Knights of St. John. This charitable organization cared for the ill with great compassion.

Later they assisted the Knights of Crusaders in their effort to win back the Holy Land. As the Knights of St. John and Knights of Crusaders attacked the city walls, the Saracens first threw glass bombs containing highly flammable liquids and then flaming torches. Many knights were severely burned, some suffering agonizing deaths. Risking horrible death, those knights who were able struggled desperately to help their burning comrades, beating out the flames and dragging the men to safety. In acknowledgment of their heroic deeds of rescuing fellow knights and fighting fires, the cross which they wore was decorated and inscribed.

In 1530, the Island of Malta was given to the courageous knights. The symbol on their flag, the eight-point cross, became known as the "Maltese Cross." The cross, which had originally helped the knights distinguish between friend and foe, became the ultimate symbol of heroism and service. The cross, which is also considered sacred, represents the principles of charity, loyalty, chivalry, gallantry, generosity to friend and foe, protection of the weak and dexterity in service.

Today, firefighters wear the Maltese Cross to symbolize their willingness to risk their lives to save others.

## SAINT FLORIAN

Who was St Florian? Born in 250 A.D., he was a member of the Roman Army and was sentenced to death by fire by Emperor Diocletian when he refused to follow orders and persecute all Christians in the area. Standing on the pyre erected to be set on fire killing him, Florian challenged the Roman soldiers to start the fire and said, "If you do, I will climb to heaven on the flames." Fearful of Florian, the soldiers had him drowned instead. Florian was made a Saint by Pope Lucius III, and later a person was reported to have been saved from fire by praying to St. Florian. Since then St. Florian has generally been regarded as the patron Saint of the fire service.

## DALMATIAN

One of the most recognized symbols of the fire service is the Dalmatian dog. The origins and the age of the breed are unknown. The dogs were thought to have come from Dalmatia, but recent evidence shows them clearly painted in Egyptian tombs. It is known that the Dalmatian, because of its poor hunting abilities, was relegated to the stable area of fine manor homes. It was in these stables that the Dalmatian became acquainted with the horses. It is quite common to keep dogs and other small animals, such as goats, around stables to calm high-strung horses.

Dalmatians were used by the fire service in the days of the horse drawn fire engines because they were not afraid of the horses and would guard the fire wagons. Since in the early days of fire fighting all departments were volunteer, and insurance companies would pay only the department that was hooked up to a hydrant. This led to competition and some sabotage between rival fire companies which led to the natural use of guard dogs to protect the equipment. The Dalmatian, with its superior agility and endurance could also run out in front of the horses and clear the streets for the approaching fire engine. In this way, the fire engine did not have to slow down for traffic and tire the horses early. When the horses were replaced by gasoline-driven fire engines, many fire departments kept their Dalmatians. In many areas you can still see the Dalmatian standing proudly, on top of the fire engine as it races to another emergency.

As always, I appreciate your comments, questions and criticisms. I can be reached at; Council Bluffs Fire Department, 200 South 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Council Bluffs, Iowa 51503, 712-328-4671 or via e-mail at [jhutcheson@cbfire.org](mailto:jhutcheson@cbfire.org).